Rules of the Game
All About Movement (Part Five)
By Skip Williams

Sometimes, it can prove difficult to decide what a flying creature can do, especially within a dungeon's confines. In Part Five, we'll build on the flight basics we covered in Part Four.

More About Flight

Climbing and Diving in a Tight Space

Creatures that cannot fly straight up usually can ascend in a spiral by circling as they climb. Because most creatures that can't fly straight up also have minimum forward speeds of half their base flying speeds and can move at only half speed when climbing, its difficult for them to turn in place while climbing because doing so requires them expend extra movement that does not count as forward movement (though many creatures can do so by making a double move). A creature's up angle also determines how much altitude it can gain during a move action.

Likewise, creatures that cannot fly straight down can descend in a spiral. Because creatures that have a limited down angles cannot turn in place (see Table 2-1 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*), they cannot make their descending spirals any tighter than their turning radius normally allows.

Because flying creatures descend at two to four times the speed they can ascend (most creatures ascend at half speed but descend at double speed), they lose altitude far more quickly than they can gain it.

Stalling and Freefalling

Stalling represents the failure of a flying creature's wings (or other motive agent) to keep the creature aloft. The rules are a little sketchy when it comes to what happened during a stall, so here are some unofficial suggestions.

A stalling creature falls, but it wings provide considerable drag and tend to slow the creature's fall. As noted earlier, a creature falls 150 feet during the first round spent stalling, and it falls 300 feet each round thereafter. Wingless flyers that stall still have some residual lift and fall more slowly than non-flyers.

A flying creature that cannot maintain its minimum forward speed because it has been rendered unconscious, has become paralyzed, has become magically held, or becomes unable to move for some other reason stalls at the beginning of its first turn after the debilitating effect occurs.

A stalling creature can take no actions, except to recover from the stall. It loses its Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any) while stalling. As noted earlier, recovering from a stall requires a Reflex save (DC 20).

A stalling creature falls more or less straight down, but it also tumbles and spins erratically. Melee or ranged attacks made against a stalling creature have a 20% miss chance.

A nonflyer (or flyer falling through the air) freefalls rather than stalls. A creature in freefall drops 500 feet the first round and 1,000 feet each round thereafter. While in freefall, a creature can attempt a single action each round. It must make a Dexterity or Strength check (creature's choice, DC 15) to avoid dropping any item it tries to use. Spellcasting is possible, but doing so requires a Concentration check (DC 15 + spell level) and if the spell has a material component, the creature must first check to see if it drops the component.

Deliberately Freefalling: A flying creature can simply stop flying and allow itself to drop like a stone. Exiting a freefall requires a full-round action (during which the creature falls 500 or 1,000 feet). A creature with Perfect maneuverability exits a freefall automatically, less maneuverable creatures require a Reflex save (DC 20). If the check fails, the creature stalls (even if it does not have a minimum forward speed), though during its next turn it can attempt to recover from the stall after falling 300 feet.

A creature with average, poor, or clumsy maneuverability suffers 3d6 points of nonlethal damage when it exits a freefall (or when it stalls from a failed attempt to leave freefall) due to the stress on its body. A freefalling creature with a fly speed can automatically recover from a freefall if it receives a *feather fall* spell, but only after falling 60 feet; the creature suffers no damage from the recovery.

Fast Freefalls: A creature with a fly speed can propel itself downward as a move action, adding up to twice its flying speed to the distance it freefalls. A creature with Perfect maneuverability can make a fast freefall automatically, while less maneuverable creatures require a Reflex save (DC 15). If the save fails, the creature stalls. On a successful check the creature fast freefalls for a full round.

Catching: As a full-round action, a flyer can catch a freefalling creature or object, or a stalling creature, provided that the falling creature or object is at least one size category smaller than the creature attempting the catch.

To make the catch, the creature must make a successful melee touch attack to grab the falling creature or object (a creature can voluntarily forego any Dexterity bonus to AC if desired). If the grab succeeds, the catching creature must make a Reflex save (DC 25) to keep flying. If the save fails by 4 or less, the catcher drops the falling creature or object. If the save fails by 5 or more, the catcher drops the falling creature or object and stalls if it has a minimum forward speed. If the catcher does not have a minimum forward speed, it falls 1d4x10 feet.

Obstacles and Collisions

Because flying creatures cannot always change direction when they wish to, they must take great care to avoid blundering into obstacles or into other creatures.

Maneuvering PastObstacles: To turn and avoid an obstacle at its own altitude, a flying creature must be able to turn in place. If it cannot turn in place, it needs at least 5 feet of space between it and the obstacle if it wishes to turn to avoid a collision (because in an aerial turn you move into the square ahead of you and then turn left or right 45°). It cannot move diagonally past a corner in the air or on the ground, so any turn you make must carry you past an obstacle's corner before you can fly past it.

If turning to avoid an obstacle isn't possible, it may be possible to climb over or dive under the obstacle. A creature with maximum up or down angle of 45° needs at least 5 feet of clear space between it and an obstacle for every 5 feet it must climb or dive to get over or under the obstacle (you can't move past a corner on a diagonal, even when climbing or diving). A creature with a maximum up or down angle of 60° needs at least 5 feet of clear space between it and an obstacle for every 10 feet it must climb or dive to get over or under the obstacle.

Maneuvering PastCreatures: Flying past another creature works much like flying past an obstacle except that you can move on a diagonal to get past a creature. This makes it slightly easier to pass by without colliding.

Colliding with an Obstacle: Here's another place where the rules don't help much, so here are some more unofficial suggestions.

If you fly into an obstacle and you cannot land there, you must make a Reflex save (DC 15) to avoid damage. If you fail the save, you and the object you strike take damage as though an object of your weight fell a distance equal to half your flying speed before you hit. (If it isn't clear what your speed before the collision was, use your flying speed during your previous turn.) If the object you hit has a hardness of 6 or less, you take nonlethal damage (the object takes normal damage).

Your flying movement stops when you strike, forcing you to stall (even if you don't have a minimum forward speed) and fall straight down. If you're still conscious after the collision, you can make Climb check (DC = surface's DC + 20) to catch yourself and keep from falling. If the surface is sloped (see the Climb skill description), the Climb DC to catch yourself is lower (DC = slope's DC + 10).

Colliding with a Creature: Here's another place where the rules don't help much, so you can use these unofficial suggestions.

You can freely pass through your allies' spaces in the air just as you can on the ground. If you fly into a creature that is not your ally, you effectively attempt to overrun it. You can execute a bull rush against the creature instead, if you wish. An overrun or bull rush normally requires a standard action. If you accidentally enter an enemy's space you must make a Reflex save (DC 15); if you fail, you stall (even if you don't have a minimum forward speed). If you succeed, you can continue with your accidental bull rush or overrun, but you suffer a -4 penalty to all the opposed checks you make to resolve the bull rush or overrun.

As with an overrun attack, the creature can decide not to block your movement, though this might cause the creature to stall (see the section on overruns). If so, you simply move through its space (even if you decide to bull rush the creature). You cannot stop in another creature's square, however, and if your speed isn't sufficient to carry you through the other creature's space, you must attempt an overrun or bull rush.

If the creature is too small to overrun, you must try to bull rush it instead if you can't pass through its space.

If the creature is too big to overrun, you strike it just as if it were an obstacle, and you and the creature take nonlethal damage. Both you and the creature you strike make Reflex saves (DC 15) to avoid damage, but the creature you strike gets a +4 bonus for each size category it is bigger than you. You stall just as if you struck an obstacle. The creature you strike stalls if it fails its Reflex save.

If you are at least three size categories smaller than the creature whose space you are entering (or if you

are Tiny, Diminutive, or Fine size) you can enter the creature's space without colliding, bull rushing, or overrunning, but entering the creature's space provokes an attack of opportunity. Likewise, if you are at least three size categories smaller than the creature whose space you are entering, you also can enter the creature's space without colliding, bull rushing, or overrunning, but entering the creature's space provokes an attack of opportunity.

Actions while Flying

Most actions work exactly the same way in the air as they do on the ground; exceptions are noted here.

Full-Round Actions

A creature with a minimum forward speed usually cannot use full-round actions in the air unless those actions allow it to move forward at least at its minimum speed. For example, a harpy (average maneuverability) could charge or run while flying, but it could not make a full attack or cast a spell with a casting time longer than one action (but see the note on casting time).

Cast a Spell

Flying spellcasters can cast their spells without too much difficulty; however, aerial spellcasters often encounter some problems other spellcasters do not.

Casting Time: Most spells require 1 standard action to cast. The creature can move and then cast the spell, or cast the spell and then move.

A creature with a minimum forward speed cannot cast a spell with a casting time of 1 round or more while airborne unless it is riding on a flying mount or flying device.

A creature with minimum forward speed can cast spells with a casting time of a full-round action (such as a sorcerer casting a spell modified with metamagic) by first using a move action to travel forward and maintain its minimum speed. The caster can then use a standard action to start the full-round spell. The next round, the creature can finish the spell by using another standard action, then use a move action to travel forward and maintain its minimum speed.

Concentration: Spellcasters using natural flight or using a spells or magic devices that empower them to fly personally, such as a *fly* spell or *winged boots,* can cast spells while flying without Concentration checks (unless other conditions they encounter while aloft require them). For casters using mounts or magic devices that function like mounts, such as a *carpet of flying* or a *broom of flying,* must make a Concentration check (DC 10 + spell level) or lose the spell. A creature riding as a passenger on a mount or magic device also must make Concentration checks to cast spells. Particularly violent motion from the mount or device makes the Concentration check more difficult (see the Concentration skill description in the *Player's Handbook*).

Drop Prone

A creature cannot drop prone while flying. If a flying creature lands, it can drop prone as a free action.

Run

A creature using natural flying speed can use the run action. As with any other run action, the creature must move in a straight line. A flyer using the run action cannot gain more than 5 feet of altitude, but it can lose any amount of altitude, and it gains the normal bonus movement for the altitude lost (5 feet per 5 feet descended, a maximum of twice its normal flying speed.) For example, a harpy could use the run action to fly 320 feet in a straight line. While doing so, it could not gain more than 5 feet of altitude.

Take 5-Foot Step

A flying creature cannot use the 5-foot step rule unless it has perfect or good maneuverability (and thus no minimum forward speed).

Withdraw

Flying creatures can use the withdraw action if they prove maneuverable enough to do so without colliding with their opponents.

Flanking

The rules for flanking apply in the air. It is possible, however, to flank a flying creature from the top and bottom.

Creatures in Aerial Combat

Aerial combat takes place in three dimensions, and each flying creature occupies a roughly cubical space and can reach above and below itself, as shown on the following table:

Flying Creature Size and Face

Size	Space	Natural Reach
Fine	1/2 ft. across x 1/2 ft high	0 ft.
Diminutive	1 ft. across x 1 ft high	0 ft.
Tiny	2 1/2 ft. across x 2 1/2 ft. high	0 ft.
Small	5 ft. across x 5 ft. high	5 ft.
Medium	5 ft. across x 5 ft. high	5 ft.
Large (Long)	10 ft. across x 5 ft. high	5 ft.
Large (Tall)	10 ft. across x 5 ft. high	10 ft.
Huge (Long)	15 ft. across x 10 ft. high	10 ft.
Huge (Tall)	15 ft. across x 15 ft. high	15 ft.
Gargantuan (Long)	20 ft. across x 15 ft. high	15 ft.

Gargantuan (Tall)	20 ft. across x 20 ft. high	20 ft.
Colossal (Long)	30 ft. across x 25 ft. high	15 ft.
Colossal (Tall)	30 ft. across x 30 ft. high	25 ft.

Space: In the air, a creature's space includes length, width, and height. Creatures more than 5 feet high occupy a vertical column of two or more spaces, one space for each 5 feet of height.

Natural Reach: Natural reach is how far the creature can reach when it fights. A creature flying on its own threatens the area within that distance from itself, including above and below. A creature riding a mount or flying device also threatens all the spaces around it, except those blocked by the mount or device.

Tall Creature: A tall creature is a biped or similar creature. Creatures in the **D&D** game are not designated as "tall" or "long"; however, you can determine this for yourself easily by noting its reach entry. For example, a Large creature with a reach entry of 10 feet is "tall" (unless it's using a reach weapon).

Long Creature: A long creature is a quadruped or similar creature. Creatures in the **D&D** game are not designated as "tall" or "long"; however, you can easily determine this for yourself by noting its reach entry. For example, a Large creature with a reach entry of 5 feet is "long."

Special Attacks in the Air

Flying creatures can try a variety of special tactics while in the air. In general, these work just like similar attacks made on the ground. Exceptions are listed below. The rules don't cover these situations in much detail, so most of this section much consists of unofficial suggestions.

Bull Rush

An aerial bull rush requires the attacker to ram a foe, which can prove risky for both the attacker and the defender.

Initiating and Resolving an Aerial Bull Rush: You begin in the same way as bull rush on the ground.

To resolve an aerial bull rush, make opposed Strength checks or opposed Dexterity checks (each creature involved chooses which to use). Apply modifiers for each opponent's size as noted in the *Player's Handbook,* even when using opposed Dexterity checks. No creature can claim a stability bonus in an aerial bull rush.

Aerial Bull Rush Results: A creature that has been moved in an aerial bull rush must make a Reflex save (DC 20) immediately or stall (even if it does not have a minimum forward speed). If the attacker fails to move the defender during an aerial bull rush, it moves back 5 feet, as noted in the description of the bull rush action and must immediately make a Reflex save (DC 20) or stall (even if it does not have a minimum forward speed).

Accidental Aerial Bull Rush: As noted in the section on collisions, you suffer a -4 penalty on all opposed checks you make to resolve a collision with a foe.

Charge

Flying creatures can use the charge action. A flying charge must be in straight line and most cover at least 10 feet (2 squares). A flyer can charge while diving, but not while gaining more than 5 feet altitude (unless the flyer has perfect maneuverability and can climb without losing speed).

If a flyer makes a diving charge of at least 30 feet (6 squares) and also loses 10 feet of altitude or more, it can attack only with a claw or with a piercing or slashing weapon. These attacks, however, deal double damage.

Grapple

Aerial grappling can prove hazardous to attacker and defender alike. Except where noted here, a grappling attack in the air works just like grappling on the ground.

Who Is Flying and Who Is Held: If you have a minimum forward speed or if you rely on wings or other appendages to stay aloft, you cannot fly if another creature has a hold on you (but see Just Hanging On, below). An attacker that establishes a hold against you must be able to carry your weight or you both fall. In the course of an aerial grapple, the combatant who must hold everyone's weight can change from turn to turn. The last creature to establish a hold must be able to keep everyone involved in the grapple aloft or everyone falls.

Grappling a Foe Two or More Sizes Smaller: If you establish a hold against an airborne creature, your foe stalls if it has a minimum forward speed. You can simply hold up the creature if it is two or more size categories smaller than you (provided that the foe's weight, plus the weight of any gear you carry, does not exceed your light load). Your flying movement remains unhindered while you hold your foe. Each round, you can perform a move action and also use a standard action to conduct the grapple against the foe.

Grappling a Foe Not Two or More Sizes Smaller: You can try to fly and hold a foe that is your size, one size category smaller, or one size category bigger than you. To do so, you must make a successful opposed grapple check against every foe involved in the grapple. The grapple check requires a standard action, but the movement is part of that standard action. The attacking flyer inflicts no grappling damage with a success. If the attacker fails, it cannot move and stalls even if it does not have a minimum forward speed, and it must release everyone in its grasp.

Even with a successful check, all the foes you hold counts as part of your load (creatures can fly only of lightly loaded). If you're overloaded, you must drop all foes or stall, even if you don't have a minimum forward speed. If you choose to hang on, you stall and all foes in your grasp fall along with you. You cannot recover from the stall until you shed your excess load.

Dropping a Foe: If you release another flyer from your hold during your turn, it stalls if it has a minimum forward speed, otherwise, it resumes normal flight. A nonflying creature that you drop freefalls. Any creature you drop can try to hang on, but see Just Hanging On.

Escaping While Airborne: If you escape from a foe's grasp while airborne, you can fly away in normal flight if you have a flying speed. (You are assumed to escape at a moment that's convenient for you.)

Taking -20: An attacker with the improved grab ability can opt to conduct a grapple with only part of its body. Doing so imposes a -20 on the attacker's grapple checks, as noted in the *Monster Manual.* A flying grappler who takes the -20 penalty need not use a standard action to continue moving, but it can just fly along holding onto the foe. Even so, the held opponent counts as part of the load the attacker carries.

Because the attacker is not using an action to make a grapple check, it does not damage the creature it holds, establish a pin, or accomplish any other effect that requires a successful grapple check. The foe still can attempt a grapple check of its own during its own turn to escape.

Pin: While aloft you cannot pin a creature the same size as you or bigger than you.

Just Hanging On: Some combatants might not appreciate being grappled and dropped, especially if that means plummeting to earth afterward. If a dropped creature is at least two size categories smaller than the creature that dropped it, it can make a DC 20 climb check to avoid falling. If the Climb check succeeds, the dropped creature holds on somehow, and neither the creature that made the successful Climb check nor the creature to which it clings are considered grappled. The clinging creature, however, must hold on with at least one hand; it cannot use a shield, and loses its Dexterity bonus (if any) to Armor Class. If damaged while clinging, the creature must make a Climb check (DC 20) or fall.

If the larger creature moves during its action, the clinging creature moves along with it. The larger can throw off the clinging creature with a grapple (a standard action) opposed by the clinging creature's Climb check.

Overrun

A flying creature can plow past or over an opponent using an overrun attack.

Avoiding the Overrun: A flyer can avoid an aerial overrun just as a landbound creature can. If the creature has a minimum forward speed, it must make a Reflex save (DC 15) to avoid stalling after the sudden maneuver. If the defender decides to avoid, you can move through its space whether it stalls or not.

Blocking the Overrun: If the opponent decides to block, make opposed Strength checks or opposed Dexterity checks (each creature involved chooses which to use).Bonuses and penalties for size are the same as a normal overrun no matter which kinds of checks the opponent's use. In addition, each creature gets a bonus based on its maneuverability rating, as follows: perfect +12, good +8, average +4, poor +0, clumsy -4.

Stability bonuses do not apply in aerial overruns.

Overrun Results: An aerial overrun generally has the same results as a regular overrun, except that a creature knocked prone stalls instead (even if it doesn't have a minimum forward speed). If an overrunning attacker wins the opposed check, it can inflict unarmed strike damage on the defender instead of making the defender stall. A creature with natural weaponry uses the damage rating of one of its primary attacks as the unarmed strike damage.

Trip

Most creature using wings or other appendages to fly can be tripped. Incorporeal creatures with perfect maneuverability, and creatures that don't rely on their limbs to fly cannot be tripped when in flight.

Resolving the Trip Attempt: The attacker makes a Strength check. The defender can oppose the attempt with a Strength check or a Dexterity check. Each creature gets a bonus based on its maneuverability rating, as follows: perfect +12, good maneuverability +8, average +4, poor +0, clumsy -4.

Stability bonuses do not apply in aerial overruns.

Trip Results: A successful trip forces the defender to stall (even if the tripped creature doesn't have a minimum forward speed) rather than knocking the defender prone.

What's Next?

It's time to tackle some of the various miscellaneous topics regarding movement next week!

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has been the Sage of *Dragon* *Magazine* since 1986. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (his borscht gets rave reviews).

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